It’s a Guy Thing:
The Experience of Women
in Canadian Sports Car Competition

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Jane Jenkins laughed when she related that child’s remark to me. As a history professor, she is now in her element in the classroom. But as a college student herself, she had been equally at home behind the wheel of a Datsun 240Z, hurling the car through a twisty slalom course. In 1986 she was the Saskatoon Sports Car Club’s Rookie of the Year in auto slalom racing.

Professor Jenkins was not the only or the first woman to race a car in Canada. Many Canadian women have been involved in all aspects of auto sport since the dawn of the twentieth century. That said, relative to men, few of them competed and none have yet made it to the top: Indy Car or Formula One. So that child’s reaction to Jane as “racer” was understandable and common. Our society does not naturally assume that women do car racing. Likewise, the scholarly and popular literature on women in sport is extensive, but there is little on their role in auto sport. Why, then, is it so hard to conjure up the image of the female racer? Because, like the so-called mainstream stick and ball sports, auto sport is overwhelmingly a male activity, played by men and almost exclusively run by men. Until very recently, all of its “superstars” have been men. The primary audience is young men, and the sponsors (automakers, breweries, and tobacco companies, for example) tailor their advertising to appeal to that market. And above all, auto sport uses the quintessentially male technology: the car. Sports cars, in particular, have been promoted as “toys for boys.” In short, “It’s a guy thing.”

In that respect, it differs little from other sports. Still, to leave the story at that would be a “double fault.” First, the social portrait of the sport would be incomplete. Second, and more important, it would not do justice to the many women who refused to be constrained by prevailing attitudes and who successfully broke into what was otherwise an exclusively male activity. The historical record makes an important point: that women have competed—and excelled—at all levels and

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in all forms of international auto sport. However, both formal and informal barriers have kept their numbers small. The history of women in Canadian sports car competition represents a microcosm of that larger experience.

Up to this point, however, it has been a largely untold story, for several reasons. First, despite auto sport’s huge and growing popularity, academic historians have tended to exclude it from the wider sports history narrative by suggesting that it is not actually a sport. Focused on athleticism and the stick and ball sports, they see auto racing only as a technological activity in which the car does all the work. Thus, they tend to ignore the fact that the physical and mental demands of its top levels—Indy Car and Formula One racing—require their drivers to be superb athletes in all respects. Consequently, while auto sport in general has an extensive popular literature, there is relatively little scholarly work. Second, since the sport lacks the national profile of hockey, Canadian auto sport historiography is particularly weak. Finally, women are scarcely mentioned in either.

This article attempts to place the experience of women in Canadian sports car competition within an historical context. First, for comparative purposes it briefly surveys the female experience in auto sport in the United States and Europe. Second, it discusses the extent of their participation in the sport in Canada over the period since 1950. Finally, it suggests why so few Canadian women have competed and thus why none have reached the top rank.

**Fast Women: The Female Experience of International Auto Sport**

Auto sport emerged quickly following the invention of the automobile, first as a marketing tool and later as a sport in its own right. Women competed during the sport’s infancy, and one of the first to achieve international renown was Canadian Kay (Defries) Petre. Born in Toronto, she pursued her avocation in Britain and France in the 1930s. Known as “The Queen of Brooklands” (a track near London), Petre placed thirteenth overall in the 1934 Le Mans twenty-four-hour race, and later became the first woman to be hired as a factory team driver, for Austin. After a serious accident, she retired from racing and became a motoring journalist. Although she never competed in Canada and her achievements were all but unknown here until the 1960s, in 1995 Petre became the first woman to be inducted into the Canadian Motorsport Hall of Fame. Along with other female racers of the interwar period, Kay Petre established the principle that women could compete alongside men in the “major leagues” of auto sport.

In the postwar period, several women distinguished themselves during the “amateur age” of American sports car racing (1950s–1960s), among them Susie Dietrich, Ruth Levy, Donna Mae Mims, Paula Murphy, and Josie Van Neumann. The female star of that period was Denise McCluggage. A natural athlete, she founded *AutoWeek* magazine in 1958, and continued writing for it until 1990. She tried racing out of curiosity and quickly demonstrated her ability. In 1961 McCluggage won the Grand Touring (GT) class in the Sebring twelve-hour endurance race, and later became the first American female factory team driver in European rallying. In fact, the 1960s marked the heyday of winning women in international rallying. Pat Moss-Carlsson (sister of Formula One racer Stirling Moss and wife